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# **“I have gained self-confidence”. Exploring the impact of the role-playing technique STARS on students in German lessons<sup>1</sup>**

***Katrin Geneuss, Fabian Obster & Gabriele Ruppert***

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## **Abstract**

Finding tools that stimulate creativity, empathy and self-confidence is one of the core challenges of the 21st century. Performative education being one of them, a need for developing convincing performative concepts arises (Jogschies, Schewe & Stöver-Blahak 2018). The improvisational role-playing technique edu-larp constitutes one such tool, combining the training of social and personal skills with the exploration of various themes. An adaptation of this format to institutional settings coined STARS (STudent Activating Role-playing gameS, Geneuss 2019) has been applied in several schools in Bavaria. To ascertain the students' perspective on their perceived learning, data from 161 quantitative surveys were further augmented by feedback-talks. To gain insight into the teachers' perspective on how the tool can be implemented in German lessons, which general skills can be trained and what challenges might arise when applied in formal education, we applied a qualitative design grounded upon 7 interviews. It emerges that applying edu-larp in classrooms is perceived as a meaningful tool to treat curricular topics. It also contributes to train social and personal skills, which in turn can lead to self-confident face-to-face interaction. Yet, multiple challenges keep educators from applying the technique.

## **1 Introduction**

The so-called *Generation Z* are digital natives, and social interaction among peers happens to a great extent online. Expressing moods and feelings is realised through emoticons rather than body-language and mimics, and replies to written comments are not spontaneous but planned. As a consequence, physical interaction can be intimidating. As described by the daily newspaper

*Süddeutsche Zeitung*,<sup>2</sup> trust and general well-being decrease for a large proportion of children and youth and some run the risk of avoiding direct interaction. For classroom teaching, sociologist Hartmut Rosa together with pedagogue Wolfgang Endres (2016) require tools to create a safe environment wherein students can explore the physical and affective implications of direct communication, perceiving the resonance of their actions. Ideally, such a setting also serves the purpose of acquiring knowledge as defined by curricular requirements. Furthermore, overarching goals within values education, such as democracy, ought to be operationalised "not only in a cognitive, but also in an affective way, such as the performance of democratic teaching structures that allow discursive decision-making processes" (Anselm 2020).<sup>3</sup>

### 1.1 Edu-larp

*Edu-larp* (educational live-action-role-playing game) is a role-playing game format striving towards these goals in a safe environment (Neubauer 2015). In contrast to other role-playing techniques, an *edu-larp* consists of a long playing-phase without any external observers (Geneuss 2019). In an open, improvisational process, all participants collaboratively tell a story within a pre-defined setting (Simkins 2015). The game-master, interpreting a role herself, guides the players through scenes, providing the setting with place and time and sometimes giving specific instructions.

The format itself dates back to the 1970s and has its origins in pen-and-paper role playing like *Dungeons and Dragons* or *Das Schwarze Auge* (Branc 2018). *Larp* emerged when the players of tabletop-games felt that it was rewarding to embody the characters by dressing up and physically interacting in a setting that resembled the fictitious world. The term *edu-larp* describes *larps* that are designed to go beyond entertainment and reach pre-defined educational goals (Balzer & Kurz 2014). To highlight the difference between an open *edu-larp* which explores features of the characters played, and more rigid curricular role-playing games, Geneuss (2019) decided to coin the acronym STARS, standing for *STudent Activating Role-playing gameS*. A STARS is an *edu-larp* played in school, designed along the pre-defined teaching aims of the curriculum. The mechanisms of the games appear to be similar to *Process Drama* (Heathcote & Bolton 1995; Howell & Heap 2001), but, as described above, *edu-larp* and STARS have their roots in tabletop-games. Further, the playing phase is usually continuous and not interrupted. Another similar drama technique in classrooms is *Simulation globale* (Maak 2011), but instead of

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<sup>2</sup> Jan Stremmel: *Grüße vom Sofa*. *Süddeutsche Zeitung* vom 6.1.2020. Retrieved from <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/leben/millennials-ausgehen-psychologie-1.4742432?reduced=true>.

<sup>3</sup> "Im schulischen Unterricht kann dies durch die performative Gestaltung einer demokratischen Unterrichtsstruktur realisiert werden, die diskursive Entscheidungsfindungsprozesse ermöglicht." Translation by the authors.

repeatedly playing the same fictitious character in different situations over the course of a year, a STARS claims to be feasible within only four lessons, requiring only 45 minutes of preparation workshop, 90 minutes for the playing phase and 45 minutes for reflection after the game (also referred to as post-workshop).

The authors started testing the tool STARS in German lessons in Bavaria in 2017. Over the course of two years, more than a dozen games were played in several Bavarian schools. Out of these games, 8 volunteering classes at 6 different schools were assessed, with students being between 9 and 16 years old. The classes were chosen according to criteria of maximizing diversity, resulting in a wide range of age (9-16 years) and levels (primary to upper secondary). A team of pedagogues, students and actors conducted the STARS-units, with the teachers present in the classrooms, taking on minor roles. In collaboration with the Swedish edu-larp company *LajvVerkstaden*, the STARS team designed games that among other topics revolved around Greek mythology, poetry, children's rights and medieval history. In some cases, students already had factual knowledge about a certain content. For example, the teacher had already introduced the students to children's rights. In the setting, they acted as agents who had to find out which rights were violated in different contexts, for example in a hotel where children had to do the cleaning work. Not only did they have to identify the violations of children's rights, but they also had to accuse the violators in a formal setting, arguing against their explanations of why they had "employed" children. This exposed the participants to a confrontation of different perspectives and in a joint effort, they could convince the officers that the case had to be taken to court. In another game about Greek mythology, the participants met gods and demigods they did not know of before. They had to find out why Orpheus for example was sad and then propose creative activities to lift his mood, so they made him sing a song and recited a poem. If they did not know how to proceed, a game-master of the STAR-team gave suggestions. In addition to gaining knowledge about the Gods, the students had to adapt their way of speaking to the addressee, choosing different registers and paraverbal markers when interacting with Zeus as opposed to Dionysos.

Prior to designing the games, teachers were asked which topics within the subject of German felt alien to the students during German lessons. We hypothesized that through personal involvement in the game, the topic would become more accessible to the students, gain relevance and thereby increase their academic motivation. In addition to the curricular topics, all STARS served the purpose of training spontaneous interaction among participants, including the teachers. By reflecting over the process of role-taking and role-swapping in different contexts, we also aimed at building performative competence, which is defined as "the ability to understand and participate in staged interaction [...], the ability to 'read' situations, respectively their underlying deep structure" (Hallet 2008: 406) and act and react responsibly. Thereby, values like respect and democracy also come to reflection, since the process of co-creation relies on teamwork and cooperation. Figure 1 summarises the learning objectives through STARS:

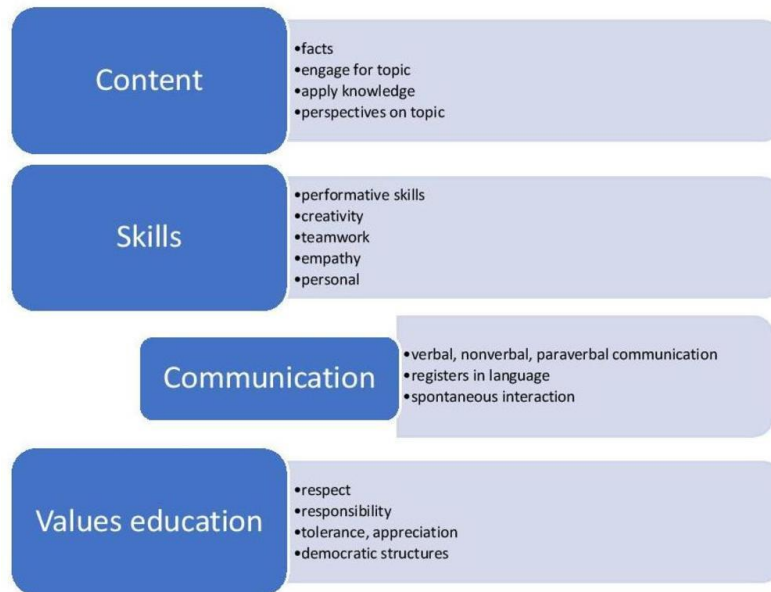


Figure 1: Learning objectives

## 1.2 Effects of role-playing games

Even though there is only little empirical evidence regarding the development of personal skills through theatre and drama tools (Wirag 2019), several fields of research have described the effects of role-playing games in multiple contexts. Role-playing games of different kinds arguably have the potential to increase the ability for role-taking and role-swapping in different contexts (Warwitz & Rudolf 2016) which in turn can lead to building performative skills (Hallet 2008; Hallet 2010). Communication and social skills develop (Krappmann 1977; Balzer 2008) as does critical thinking, in particular regarding socially constructed roles (Kiper & Mischke 2008). The motivational aspect is mentioned repeatedly (Warm 1981; Ments 1985; Hüther & Quarch 2016), suggesting that the learners develop an engaged attitude towards the theme and content of the game. Empirical data further indicates that interest in the curricular content as well as perceived competence increase after role-playing games (Bowman & Standiford 2015). Role-playing games can be seen as a tool to train creativity and flexible response with a positive effect on self-confidence (Warm 1981).

Yet, role-playing games do not by default convey the above mentioned positive effects. In order to have a sustainable impact on skills and attitudes, learners need be exposed to the learning tool repeatedly (Stadler & Spörrle 2008). If the learning goals are to be implemented in the player's everyday-life, the fictitious setting of the game needs to be dissected and the transfer of newly acquired content-knowledge needs to occur in the reflection phase (Orr & McGuinness 2014; Erpenbeck & Sauter 2015).

As in any other gamified setting, negative experiences need to be avoided since they could deter the learners from dealing with the topic in the future

(Remmele & Whitton 2014). For individual students, the unusual setting and the role-playing might result in a feeling of fear and embarrassment (Stadler & Spörrle 2008: 171). If the group is not prepared for role-playing-games as a learning tool, a general lack of discipline during the game could inhibit cooperative processes required for successful implementation (Ments 1985: 23). Therefore in school-settings, it is important to have clear constraints and rules, but also to keep the playing phases free from marking or sanctioning (Bohle 2011) as well as maintaining participation on a voluntary basis (Geneuss 2019).

### 1.3 Research questions

The learning objectives described in chapter 1.1 served as a standard guideline for the design of all games, including the workshops before and after the games. Since our didactic point of view needed to be aligned with that of the learners and the teachers, our research questions focus on the participants' perception of learning outcomes: We asked them about the learning progress they observed while or after playing a STARS and compared their perception of what they learned to the defined learning objectives. The level of content-related learning was of special interest to us, since previous research indicated that conveying new content through role-playing games could be difficult (Geneuss 2019). But we also wanted to know which of the many learning objectives students and teachers felt was best accomplished by taking part in a STARS.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the perceived effects during and after one game, we were also interested in the impact of playing several games over the course of a year, since it could be the case that the effects differ. Thus, our research questions are:

- What learning progress or effects do students perceive while or after playing a STARS in German lessons? Do these perceived effects differ after having played five STARS?
- What learning progress or impact on students do teachers observe while or after playing a STARS in German lessons?
- According to teachers, what skills can be developed by playing a STARS?
- What challenges do teachers observe in the tool?

As for the last question, we wanted to obtain information from the teachers about which features they identified as problematic. Identifying challenges is important, because so far the technique is not commonly applied in classrooms, even if the effects are portrayed in a positive way (Bowman & Standiford 2015; Geneuss 2019). Focusing on those problematic aspects can help to answer the question why that is and how to adjust the concept to make it feasible for teachers.

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<sup>4</sup> We emphasize that we cannot express any information on factual learning achievements, but only on perceptions of the participants. This is due to the circumstance that within this project, we only had contact with the students during the four lessons comprising the STARS (and in the case of two groups, five times four lessons) and could therefore not oversee what had been trained and taught prior to the games.

## 2 Material & methods

In order to answer those questions, we set up a mixed-methods research design based on quantitative and qualitative data. Since we had a large number of students (n=161), but significantly less teachers (n=7), we had to find appropriate ways to retrieve information of comparable value. Thus, our design consists of a quantitative questionnaire and qualitative feedback talks and semi-structured interviews.

### 2.1 Students' perspective – questionnaires

The total of 161 students aged 9-16 were from 6 different Bavarian schools and 8 different classes. During German lessons of German as a first language (7 groups) and German as a second language (1 group), the students took part in one out of 6 different games. Groups who played more than one game received the questionnaire after the first game, so that all surveys were filled in after playing the first game. The questionnaire consisted of a Likert-scale with 5 items followed by open questions. In question 7, we asked whether they felt if they had learned something, and if so, what.<sup>5</sup> On the Likert-Scale<sup>6</sup>, we wanted the students to take a clear stand whether they felt that they had learned something or not. The subsequent open explanations of what they had learned were of major importance in the design of the survey, since, for increased content validity, we did not want the students to only mark pre-defined boxes, but we demanded their own reflection on their perceived learning.

The open answers were structured according to *Qualitative Content Analysis* (Mayring 2015), a systematic qualitative data analysis. Step by step, analytical units were independently classified into categories by two researchers. All categories were inductive and thereby defined during the analysis. They were aligned with anchor examples (see chapter 3). Using the software program MAXQDA, the categories went through feedback loops, finally establishing eleven different categories.

### 2.2 Students' perspective – formative feedback talks

A third set of data were notes taken during formative feedback-talks with 60 students. We conducted those talks with the two groups who had played five STARS over the course of a year. This meant that those students had significantly more experience in playing STARS. Each class consisted of 30

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<sup>5</sup> The questionnaire consisted of several questions regarding the playing experience, for example how they felt in their groups, but also suggestions for improvement. For this analysis, we only focus on the question of perceived learning.

<sup>6</sup> The Likert-Scale to answer the question, if students felt they had learned something through one STARS, had the following options: 1 – yes, a lot (ja, vieles); 2 – yes, a bit (ja, etwas); 3 – neither a lot nor little (weder viel noch wenig); 4 – rather little (eher wenig); 5 – very little (sehr wenig); no answer (keine Angabe).



students, and we had a 5-minute individual conversation with each of them outside the classroom at the end of the year. We asked the students about their perception of the effects.<sup>7</sup> Due to the small number of students (n=60), this set of qualitative data is rather complimentary to the research design. Yet, the data retrieved might indicate whether different effects are perceived when playing several STARS as compared to playing only one STARS. As the open answers in the questionnaires, these answers were inductively structured and established four categories.

### 2.3 Teachers' perspective – interviews

To map the teachers' perspectives, we conducted semi-structured oral interviews with seven teachers. The interview guidelines are available at Supplementary File 1. The questions invited teachers to answer extensively, so they could even add aspects they considered important but the researchers had not asked for. Except for one teacher, they did not have a background in drama teaching nor were they experienced role-players. During the games, they always took on minor roles, so they could experience the dynamics of the game and simultaneously observe their students. The questions asked in the interview focused on a) impact and learning outcomes, b) challenges, c) transfer of learning outcomes and d) prerequisites for applying STARS in their own teaching. The oral interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed according to *Qualitative Content Analysis* (Mayring 2015). Step by step, analytical units (sentences in our case) were classified into categories. Several categories had been established before the assessments (deductive category application), while others were defined during the analysis (inductive category development). All categories were aligned with anchor examples. As the other qualitative data, these categories also went through feedback loops and were revised over the course of the analysis. The material and methods and their respective research questions are summarized in Table 1.

We are aware that the set of data diverge and that in longer interviews teachers get to express a more in-depth and nuanced perception of the role-playing games. On the other hand, we only had 7 teachers as opposed to 161 students. When considering conducting similar interviews with the students, we opted for quantitative data collection instead, because we wanted to grasp the entire spectrum of perceptions and therefore asked all students who had participated in a STARS. We need to critically remark that different methods for retrieving information after playing just one and after playing 5 STARS were applied. In the feedback talks, students had the chance to ask questions and add information, which is not the case in the surveys.

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<sup>7</sup> The full protocol for these structured feedback-talks were a) the teacher/ STAR team member telling the impression of the students' performance and her development, b) the student telling which game she liked the most, c) her perception of effects and d) suggestions for the improvement of future games. For this paper, we only analysed answers for the perception of learning.



Table 1: Material, methods and research questions

Perspective	Research question	Method	Material
<b>Students</b>	What learning progress or effects do students perceive while or after playing a STARS in their German lessons?	Statistical analysis	161 surveys
<b>Students</b>	Do these effects differ after having played five STARS?	Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA)	60 formative feedback talks
<b>Teachers</b>	What learning progress or impact on students do teachers observe while or after playing a STRAS in German lessons?	Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA)	7 teachers: semi-structured interviews
<b>Teachers</b>	What skills can be developed by playing a STARS?	Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA)	7 teachers: semi-structured interviews
<b>Teachers</b>	What challenges can be observed in the tool?	Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA)	7 teachers: semi-structured interviews

### 3 Learning in STARS

This chapter presents the results of the study by categorising and structuring the data. First, we will show the information retrieved from the students' surveys and the feedback-talks, analysing what learning progress students themselves perceived while or after playing a STARS. Secondly, the students' perspective on learning through STARS in German lessons is augmented by the teachers' observations, as expressed in the interviews. Thirdly, we extracted information from the teachers' interviews on skill training through STARS. Lastly, and again from the teachers' perspective, the challenges that arise when applying of this tool are presented.

#### 3.1 Students' perspective on their perceived learning

When asked whether they perceived they had learned something, 52% of the students gave a positive answer on the Likert-scale, indicating that they felt they had gained "a lot" or "a bit" of new knowledge. In contrast summarising the negative answers, only 22% stated that they felt they had learned "rather little" or even "very little" after playing STARS.

However, these numbers are difficult to interpret, since we do not have comparable data of the perception of other learning tools for this group. Therefore, this study went on to analyse in which fields and areas the students felt they had progressed. For this purpose, 59% of the students specified what they felt they had learned. These open answers were assessed to determine a more detailed view on the perceived learning-outcomes by the students and were coded by two separate researchers who then established 11 different

Table 2: Students' answers on the Likert-Scale

Likert-Scale	1 (yes, a lot)	2 (yes, a bit)	3 (neither a lot nor a little)	4 (rather little)	5 (very little)	no answer
<b>numbers</b> (n=161)	15	69	21	22	13	21
<b>percentage</b>	9%	43%	13%	14%	8%	13%

categories. Some of the participants wrote not just one, but two learning outcomes, which explains why the figures in the chart add to more than 100.<sup>8</sup> Following the chart, we will present all categories with their corresponding anchor examples.

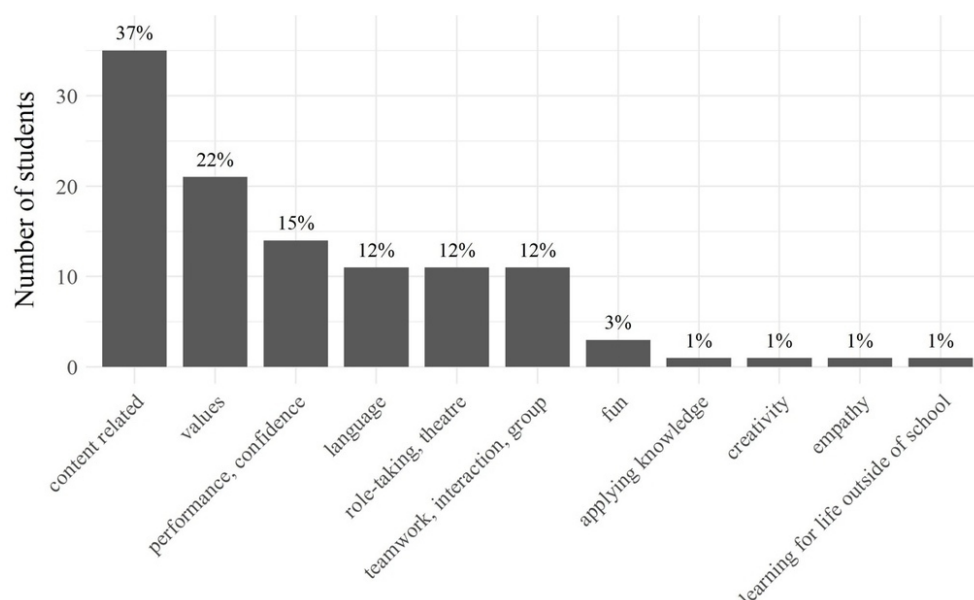


Figure 2: Students' aspects of perceived learning (multiple answers possible)

Of those students who explained their perceived learning, 37% of the answers can be classified as related to content, topic or theme of the respective game during the course of a STARS (anchor example: "I have gathered information about the Gods" S106). 22% of the open answers were coded as "values", referring to answers such as respect for their peers ("be respectful" S93). 15% of the answers indicated that the game had led to feeling more confident when performing in public ("be more self-confident in life" S31), while 12% can be classified as having deepened their language-skills. They expressed that they are now more agile in speaking spontaneously or in including expressions that

<sup>8</sup> The answers of 95 students who gave a more detailed answer to what they perceived as a learning outcome can be related to 110 specifications of aspects.

are adequate in a certain context or that were uttered in other languages ("How you speak in the middle ages" S129). 12% of the answers indicated that the game had deepened their skills of taking on roles and swapping perspective ("when acting, I can immerse better in characters" S71). 12% of the answers told that the students felt they had learned to interact more adequately and more effectively with the group, including the teacher ("that we need to learn how to cooperate" S104). The aspects of having fun ("I had fun" S119), applying knowledge ("enacting knowledge and applying it" S57), creativity ("be creative" S125) and empathy ("that you would talk to someone when that person is not feeling well" S19) were only mentioned a minor number of times, as was the aspect learning for life outside of school ("I think I learned a lot, but it will not help me in school" S53).

In the closing feedback talks, confidence was the category that was mostly mentioned, since many of the students stated that they felt they had become "braver", "more confident at giving presentations" and learned "to show emotions and not to hide them" (FT1, FT2). Another strong category that emerged was the excitement of role-taking and empathising with different roles (FT1, FT2). A minor category was the aspect of trust in their peers, mentioning that they felt proud of the fact that they were able to work well in new teams, consisting not only of friends (FT1). A fourth, minor category was the importance of teamwork, since students mentioned that they could only succeed by working together (FT2). Comparing the sets of data that show the students' perspective, it emerges that the perception of better confidence when performing publicly is stronger when playing several STARS over the course of a year.

### 3.2 Teacher's perspective: STARS in lessons of German

When clustering and determining anchor examples of the teachers' observations on learning processes through live role-playing games, two aspects are mentioned repeatedly: Firstly, learning related to the theme or topic of the game ("the content is of course also trained" T5 132) as well as a confrontation with topics in a different way which can lead to more sustainable learning by applying previously acquired knowledge as well as giving incentives to deal with unfamiliar topics ("it anchors something very differently than it would be possible through pure learning, through normal teaching" T1 30-32). Secondly, uninhibited oral interaction ("by simply having to talk to each other in a playful way" T5 149-150) and motivation for written expressions ("these are aspects that then become important again while writing" T5 179-180) are highlighted. Figure 3 summarizes the learning objectives that according to the teachers can be aimed at in lessons of German, followed by an explanation of the four categories.

The teachers mentioned several aspects related to language learning in general as well as links to the curriculum for the subject German. If the topic was introduced in class previously, students could apply that, act and react

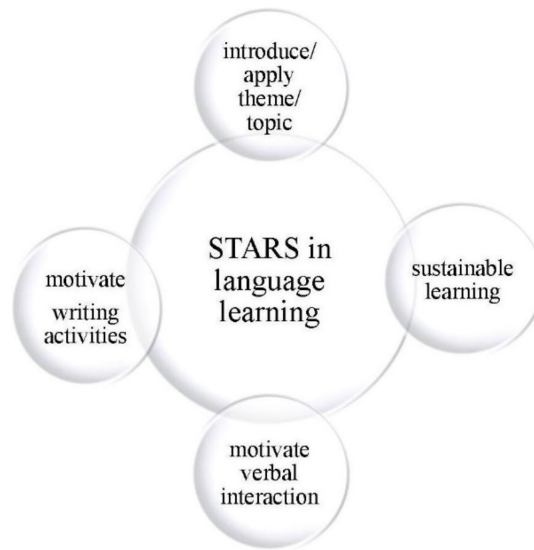


Figure 3: STARS in language learning according to teachers

accordingly in the game. Some teachers stated that they see STARS as apt for introducing new content (T3 100-102), others found it hard to introduce topics to students which they had not encountered previously. Those teachers highlighted instead that STARS offers a possibility of “deeper understanding” (T7 132) and “application” (T7 133) of already learned and discussed topics through revising content which is familiar to the students (T1 13-17, T7 132-138).

Some teachers also found that the intense confrontation with specific topics lead to a more sustainable learning. This is especially relevant when it comes to topics which are rather distant from the interests of students and alien to their everyday life. When approaching such topics, playing a STARS could lead to greater motivation to deal with them (T5 294-298) and longer-lasting learning (T5 196). For example, one of the teachers highlighted the importance of a profound understanding of Greek mythology for the interpretation of many poems as well as dramas and other literature. This topic is first introduced in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and then “they need it again later to recognise references in literature” (T5 297). If students are to refer to that knowledge about Greek mythology later on, they need to be able to access something they have learned a long time ago and this works best, if they can fall back on a memorable encounter with the topic. She therefore saw STARS as a suitable technique for achieving such long-lasting learning effects (T5 194-198).<sup>9</sup>

The motivation to actively use a language is important not only in foreign-language teaching but also in improving first languages and refining speaking

<sup>9</sup> The STARS team conducted a STARS about Greek Mythology in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade of a Munich school and the teacher stated that her students at first did not show much interest in this topic, but developed a lot of motivation and enthusiasm about it in the course of the game which lasted also for the following sequences which followed the STARS in the weeks after. (T5 294-298)

by using different language registers. Due to the designs of the STARS, all students were “required to use different levels of language” (T7 21-22), certain words or phrases as well as talking by specific rules using elaborated registers, which their teacher felt “was beneficial” (T7 32). By urging them to abide to prescribed aspects of communication and applying different registers, students could experience language on a functional level (T7 18-22). Depending on their partner, their own goal of the scene or the general situation, they had to adjust and modify their language to achieve certain objectives and “adapt their language” (T5 148-155). They developed a spontaneity in speaking which is seen as a crucial progress (T7 25-29), since prior to the games, “some had tremendous problems to just speak freely and say something” (T7 25-26).

In a STARS, the students get to “see the point in writing” (T7 51). The teachers of a class which the STARS team accompanied over the course of a whole school year said that they could see an improvement in the students writing and “felt that for a few [students] it had an effect on the description of internal action” (T1 244-246). Even though this is not an effect of STARS alone but most likely also a result of other teaching tools applied throughout the year, the reflection of emotions, action and interaction was seen as a contributing factor to enhance the students’ writing skills (T1 244-246).

### 3.3 Teacher’s perspective: Skill development

Besides these aspects, the teachers highlighted different skills that are being trained and developed by using STARS. Competences such as performance skills and confident interaction (anchor example: „with a progressing period they become braver and then dare to express themselves” T7 61-62), developing empathy through role-taking (“feeling empathic, that’s a learning process that is kicked off incredibly well through role-playing games” T6 162-163), working as a team (“interaction and the social components are crucial” T6 55-56) and reflecting on values (“to reflect through somebody else is a lot easier than about yourself” T6 25) were the main aspects mentioned. The following chart summarises the observations of the teachers regarding skill development through the STARS:

Performance skills and the ability of role-taking were aspects frequently mentioned by the teachers. They experienced that “even a few who are usually a bit quieter [...] were able to open up through such a role” (T2 18-20) during the course of a STARS. One of the teachers found that quieter students engaged in the game and really tried to immerse in their role (T2 15-17). Due to role-protection and with encouragement from teachers and the STARS team (T7 56-62), they could transfer these experiences into their everyday life and perform in a more confident way (T2 15-20; 90-95). However, one teacher indicated that aiming at building self-confidence in students required that several STARS are played repeatedly (T1 155). One teacher in whose class five STARS had been played over the course of a year, perceived that some of her students had become more confident compared to the beginning, even if



Figure 4: Skill development through STARS according to teachers

this might not necessarily lead back to having played STARS (T3 117-121).

Teachers observed that by taking on roles the students explored and experienced the world and views of a character and thereby developed skills in empathy. Two of the teachers saw that “putting oneself in another position, empathising is a learning process that is initiated very well through the role-plays” (T6 162-163) and was the crucial point of learning through STARS (T6 161-163, T5 130-132). Additionally, another teacher stated that she was surprised to see how much fun her students had when taking on new roles in a setting without pressure (T2 22-24).

To achieve their goal in the game, students had to cooperate successfully and to rely on each other, even with classmates they did not usually interact with. Several teachers observed that their students developed a respectful code of conduct with each other (T6 30-33) after playing a STARS. By promoting good and equal relationships between all students, boys and girls, over different age groups, the “relationships within the class become more natural and better” (T1 175), an effect which could also last after the game, if teachers were to uphold it in the following lessons (T1 171-177; T6 30-33). This in turn could contribute to reflect upon existing values. One teacher observed increased problem awareness as well as more reflection abilities (T3 89) in the students.

### 3.4 Teacher’s perspective: Challenges

In order to make STARS a feasible tool which can be applied in regular teaching, challenges needed to be assessed. When analysing the teachers’ observations, the positive aspects referred to the impact on the students, whereas the obstacles were mostly seen on the level of operationalisation. None of the teachers had ever applied the technique before nor was intending to do so after the STARS team had conducted the role-playing unit.



The challenges mentioned can be clustered into those that teachers have to deal with, for example the aspects of preparation ("the organisation is one problem" T7 75), facilitation ("it doesn't end in chaos" T1 80) role-taking ("the students experience the teacher from another side" T3 33-34) and heterogeneity of the class ("our students come with very different prerequisites" T5 145-146). The second group are challenges for students: participation ("Free methods always have the problem that the class is more restless" T5 74-75), heterogeneity, now from a student's perspective, and reflection of learning ("I'm missing the reflection among the students" T3 21-22). The third group are general parameters of the school system, especially concerning the infrastructure of time and space ("I need a suitable room" T7 76-77) and the verification of the learning effects ("this increase in competence from the soft skills [...] is first of all difficult to measure, it's also subjective", T7 127-128).

The chart summarises the categories established for the various challenges, and is followed by an explanation.

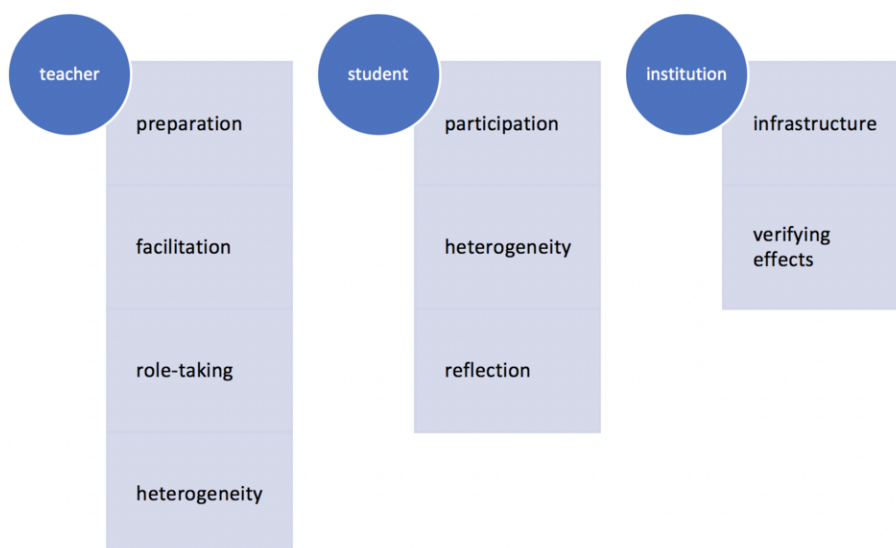


Figure 5: Challenges in STARS according to teachers

As a main obstacle and cause for not implementing STARS in their teaching, teachers saw the preparation and organisation of the STARS unit. For those who had never developed one of the games, it is "hard to see, if the planned game would work" (T1 75-76) and how it would develop, where turning points might be and how to avoid chaos (T1 75-80). Also, designing materials and preparing the game takes a lot of time. One of the teachers suggested that jointly developing a game could be useful, then again, it would be time-consuming and hard to coordinate the teachers (T4 204-207). Furthermore, the problem of having to deal with heterogenous classes and levels could be challenging (T2 189-194) when the teacher simultaneously is the game-master. Also, since STARS is about taking on different roles and exploring them, some teachers felt that it could be rather hard at first to let go of their solidified role concepts of



teacher and students (T4 80-84).

According to the teachers, students might face certain challenges in this open format, so that some might find it hard to open up and "not everybody is approving of this immediately" (T2 118-124). However, teachers saw possibilities for students to choose their level of participation or to step out of the game. Students who might have felt intimidated and exposed at first, had the possibility to slowly get used to the way of playing a STARS and find ways to take part step by step (T6 77-82). Another problem according to teachers might be that students "do not perceive STARS as learning" (T6 117-124). Since learning by some is still understood as an instructive process, students did not reflect on the training of skills and the motivation they get by playing a role-playing game (T4 114-120). Lastly, some students might have found it hard to deal with the heterogeneity among their peers, for example if they had to work in groups where language skills diverged or where individuals had different attitudes towards performing with their peers.

Referring to the educational system and the need to verify learning processes when they take place in institutions like schools, the problem teachers predicted was that some effects could mostly be seen in the long term and even then, it would be hard to trace them back to their decisive factors (T6 101-111). Lasting effects and benefits of role-playing games could best be seen when students got the chance to do different tasks repeatedly (T1 152-159), so it would be helpful to conduct more games over the course of a year (T6 25-28) in order to get longer lasting effects (T2 38-39; 111-113). Consequently, teachers found "it very difficult to define" (T2 110) what students actually learnt (T2 108-110). Another aspect was the challenge of organising rooms that were big enough and ensuring that there was more time than just the usual 45 minutes per lesson which during regular school hours was seen as rather difficult (T7 75-79). Verifying the learning effects in form of grades in the view of many teachers seemed rather difficult or even counterproductive to the aims of the technique. A vital element of the technique – spontaneity – might get lost when parts of it form an assessment as this would mean a need for practice, repetition, rules and criteria which threaten the free and creative way of learning through STARS (T7 102-110).

## 4 Discussion and outlook

This study presents the perceived impact of the role-playing format STARS. When interpreting the data, three limiting factors need to be taken into account: First, it is possible that the teachers considered the interviewer's perspective and answered accordingly. Contrary to this assumption, none of the interviewees were shy in telling the challenges and the obstacles they perceived in the tool, several of them stating that they would not apply it without external support in their classrooms. The second factor is that the teachers only assume the students' progress, not knowing what impact the STARS really had on them. Yet, we decided against a pre- and post-test design because this STARS format

is new and we are prepared to make adjustments based on the content-heavy qualitative data. Also, personal and social skill growth are best assessed by asking the individual, as has been done in the feedback talks. The third factor is that students themselves only have a limited understanding of their own learning progress. Considering that, we still believe that child-centred consultation methods give some insight into the students' perception, which needs to be considered when assessing any educational activity.

The results of the study confirm our hypothesis that STARS can be used as a tool for pre-defined learning goals to a great extent. While teachers and designers find that the tool inspires creativity, students don't necessarily perceive it that way. Also contrasting the teachers' perception that mostly social and language skills are promoted, students see their learning growth mainly within the field of content-knowledge. Interestingly, after having played several role-playing games, the students' perception shifts from having acquired content-knowledge towards having gained self-confidence and social skills. This aligns with the claim that role-playing games need to be played repeatedly in order to have an effect on everyday life patterns (Stadler & Spörrle 2008).

Due to intense oral interaction, all teachers find that STARS is an appropriate tool in German lessons. Nonetheless, when looking at the categories that emerged by coding the students' open answers, it becomes evident that students hardly perceived any language development. Since this was a clear learning objective for us as designers, we conclude that in order for the students to reflect their progress, the awareness regarding language learning needs to be raised. We even propose pre- and post-assessments of vocabulary and other markers that visualise the learning progress in the field of language learning for the students.

Even if perceived as a positive tool, teachers refrain from applying STARS since the organisational effort is high and the learning outcomes cannot be measured in a way that is compatible with the Bavarian school system. Also, teachers are reluctant to taking on the game-master's role and feel challenged when facilitating a game by themselves. Therefore, we suggest to make use of digital devices to a) provide material such as game scripts as well as preparation and reflection assignments, b) function as a game master in terms of time-keeping and distributing tasks and c) to hand out characters that can be augmented and shared with the entire group. Yet, the intense face-to-face interaction is maintained in long phases of role-playing and problem-solving. How this can be put into practice is the most recent focus of the STARS project at Munich university.

To conclude, the data indicate the potential of STARS being a performative tool that prepares young people for the modern world, since it gives them access to building empathy, self-confidence and social skills. Hence, we see this drama tool as an important complement to traditional teaching and encourage for more best-practice examples. We urge for more research in the field and for the general will to develop and implement more tools that have similar effects.

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## A Appendix

### Leitfaden STAR (Student-Activating-Role-Playing Game) im Unterricht

#### Teilstandardisiertes Interview mit narrativen Phasen

Pseudonym:

Datum:

Schulart:

Fächer:

Interview-Nummer:

#### Einleitung, Vorstellung des Projekts

Mit dieser Studie werden Möglichkeiten und Schwierigkeiten von STAR (Student-Activating-Role-Playing Game) als Unterrichtsform an deutschen Schulen ausgelotet. Sie haben ja bereits einige Spiele des Projektteams miterlebt, weshalb wir nun gerne noch genauere Informationen sammeln wollen, wie Sie diese Methode wahrnehmen.

Zuerst stelle ich ein paar Frage zu Wirkungen und Lernerfolgen von STAR bei Schülerinnen und Schülern sowie zu möglichen Problemen und Herausforderungen. Danach folgen Fragen zum Transfer des Gelernten und der Methode in den Regelunterricht sowie zu STAR als Methode im eigenen Unterricht.

#### A. Wirkungen von STAR

Wir als Projektteam haben das Gefühl, dass es zahlreiche positive Effekte mit Blick auf Kompetenzen und Lernerfolge bei den Schülerinnen und Schülern gibt, die durch STAR vermittelt werden. Welche Kompetenzen werden denn Ihrer Meinung nach durch den Einsatz von STAR geschult? Was wird konkret gelernt?

[mögliche Kompetenzen/Lernziele: Problemlösen, Fachspezifisches (Sprache), Werteerziehung, Kommunikation, Empathie, Soziale Kompetenz, Literacy, Fertigkeiten/Skills, Perspektivenwechsel, Kontextualisierung]

Gibt es Auswirkungen auf die Präsentationskompetenz der Schülerinnen und Schüler durch den Einsatz von STAR? Verändert sich die Qualität der Schülertexte?

#### B. Probleme/Schwierigkeiten bei der Umsetzung von STAR

Wir haben über die positiven Wirkungen und Effekte von STAR gesprochen. Jetzt würde ich gerne wissen: Welche Probleme sehen Sie konkret bei der Methode STAR?

Welche Schwierigkeiten treten bei der Umsetzung sowohl auf Seiten der Lehrkraft auch auf Seite der Schülerinnen und Schüler auf?



### **C. Transfer in den Regelunterricht**

Momentan bietet das STAR-Team ein Portfolio als laufende Ergänzung und Transfermöglichkeit der Rollenspielinhalte in den Regelunterricht an. Finden Sie dieses sinnvoll gestaltet? Können Sie es gut in Ihren Unterrichtsalltag integrieren?

Welche weiteren Möglichkeiten des Transfers sehen Sie oder wünschen Sie sich? Können Sie Alternativen beschreiben?

### **D. STAR im eigenen Unterricht**

Wie könnte/kann STAR im Regelunterricht Ihrer Meinung nach sinnvoll eingesetzt werden?

Welche Rahmenbedingungen müssen dafür gegeben sein? Was verhindert den Einsatz von STAR bisher noch?

Können Sie sich vorstellen, selber ein komplettes Spiel zu leiten? Was für Voraussetzungen müssten dafür gegeben sein? Warum würden Sie diese Methode einsetzen/nicht einsetzen?

[Konkretisieren: Sind Fortbildungen gewünscht? Sollte es fertige Materialien wie beispielsweise Rollenkarten geben?]

### **E. Schluss**

Vielen Dank! Wir sind nun mit allen Fragen durch. Gibt es noch etwas, das Sie gerne hinzufügen oder nochmal betonen möchten?